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ABSTRACT

To integrate second language writing with composition theories, a college writing instructor became a teacher-researcher in an ESL writing workshop course. Studying the writing experience of a Malaysian-American student in a process-oriented writing class helped to clarify what happens when non-native speakers begin to take on the identity of a writer. In excerpts from the student's writing, her progression from "translation" mode to thinking aloud on paper to her gradual development as an English language user can be followed. At one point, the student refused to sign a class letter to the university newspaper, an acknowledgement of her understanding of how the writing act might affect her and an example of a person taking ownership of her own writing. Later, when reading her piece of polished writing on a personal subject, the student realized that she felt joy and excitement in writing. The writing act can mean as much to second language learners as it does to first language speakers if they are "invited" to write, rather than "taught" to write. (NKA)

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A Voice of One's Own: Reconsidering the Needs of Non-native Speakers of English

What happens when writing workshops, modeled after that of Atwell(1987), Graves (1983), Elbow & Belanoff (1989) and Brooke (in print) are "translated" into a ESL setting? How do non-native speakers respond to a model of language teaching in which they are encouraged to see writing as more than just forms and mechanics but also as acts of communication and meaning making? How are ESL students' personal histories, expectations, and points of view linked to their assumptions about writing and their identities as writers? My need to integrate second language writing (Raimes, 1983; Kroll, 1990; Zamel, 1990, Zak, 1990) with composition theories prompted me to become a teacher-researcher in my ESL writing workshop course. I wanted to better understand the relationships between the teaching of writing and the writing needs and behaviour of non-native speakers in the writing class.

This paper does not not seek to address in-depth the questions I've raised but I hope by describing the experience of a non-native student in my current research project we can better understand what it means for second language writers to learn to write. Perhaps through May Ling's writing experience in a process-oriented writing workshop, we can begin to see what happens when non-native speakers begin to take on the identity of a writer.

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May Ling is from Malaysia and spent 2 years in an intensive English program before joining my class. When asked to talk about her writing experience, May Ling wrote:

> ....Whenever I write, I would say, "It's killing me!" I always find it hard to start writing. But somehow after i have started writing for one paragraph, it would get better yet it still kills me. I hate writing (research paper) .... because I always confuse what I want from my paper.... MOst of all, I don't know what I want; I don't know what to write. Then with no doubt I always got a "C" for my paper. consequently I have no confidence at all whenever I'm doing a reseach. Another problem of mine is I often mass up the sentence structure, this is because I think in chinese and write in English.... I only write without any order when I'm sad and have no one to talk to. I write diary once in a while. Sometimes I stop half way when my writing can't catch up my thoughts (think faster than write.)

This entry is the initial protrait we have of May Ling as a second language learner and writer. She not only talked about what writing was to her but also revealed how writing has indirectly affected her and the way she viewed herself.

In her journals, May Ling frequently recast her reflections into her life as revealed in this entry,

> Sometimes I still couldn't believe that I'm here in the USA. I'm sitting in a bus with all the Americans, no Asian. I never ever realized the process of how I was getting use to sitting with all american around me without feeling wield or uncomfortable at all....I felt so secure, quiet calm and relaxing in the bus.... Then I ... imagine if only I was in Malaysia ...it would be so terrible then. I would have to squeexe myself into the crowded bus...Oh no, How could I stand such kind of situation. Oh! I hate it. Somehow, it scared me from going back to Malaysia sometimes. I hate the rush, the rudeness, and the crowd though I miss the "makmak store" (* author's note: makmak store is an open air coffee stall -- a place where friends meet and visit with each other)

Here, May Ling did not just use writing to capture the mixed feelings she has towards her country, Malaysia, but also her sense of place in the United States. By doing so, the act of writing was no longer just reporting but rather an act of meaning making.

May Ling was not just talking about the "crowd" but was also acknowledging her ambivalence about wanting to live in Malaysia again. But yet at the same May Ling in her writing she admitted the loss she would face -- the time of sharing and togetherness that one finds in a "makmak" store.

In response to my questions about her Chinese "interference" in her English, May Ling wrote,

> "Well, I talked about thinking in Chinese and writing in English. In fact there is still other problem that I have where i think in English and talk or write in Chinese. What I means is it happen both ways. for example I communicate with my boyfriend in Mandarin but when it comes to arguing I (find myself) will speak in English. Or when I try to explain something, I would speak in English too. the only time when I think in Chinese and write in English is when ....I'm writing a formal paper. where I'm so unfamiliar with the way of writing. Writing research is different when I write or how I normally talk."

This is a powerful entry for it helps us see May Ling using language in different settings. The assumption that she only writes with a "translation" mode (directly from Chinese to English) is counterbalanced by her experience of using English in her personal life. Her attempts portray a person trying to integrate another language into her being. More importantly, her developing awareness of the multiplicities of the writing act challenges our notion of the passive ESL writer. May Ling's metalinguistic stance allows us to see the myths she had about writing as revealed,

> "...most of the time, I have to drag in my mind and get "something" to write, and it sometime takes time. When I start writing, then it's hard to stop. one page always seem not enough! Anyway, writing a journal was not as hard as it used to be... Of course my grammer, sentence structure, .. are still terrible...I feel that the words I wrote can't 100% represent what I think or what I want my reader to know because some of the feeling seem impossible to be converted into words. I admire those people who can write fluently and make the readers feel how to be felt when he was writing. they are talented."

May Ling perceives writing more as a talent, something that a person is born with. In other words, she sees herself as a non-writer since she's not talented but yet there was an underlying awareness that she could write, perhaps signifying the beginning(s) of change in the way May Ling perceived herself as a writer. In her next entry, she continued,

> I have never thought of being a writer .... I hated writing... writing is not what I'm interested in.... I still have not built up the interest to write"just" to satisfy my self or express my idea, my hapiness and myself...I always wish that I could write better, I wish but I never put in effort. only when I need to due my journal, then I force myself to write. In fact, it's not hard to write. Writing journal is not hard at all, the hard thing is to write a good journal. Oops! anyway, is journal supposed to be good. What's journal. If it's not mistaken, Journal is a writing that express what I'm thinking when I'm writing, write whatever I think regardless of the grammer, punctuation, etc,...so what I'm worry off. You see, writng journal something express my wrong idea about something about a journal is."

By using writing to juxtapose her experiences with her thoughts May Ling began to gain a deeper understanding of the writing act. This thinking aloud on paper frequently appeared in May Ling's journals, especially in relation to how she fitted in with those around her,

> ...I was worry to read because I was afraid that my essay was dull, not interesting, and with all nonsence....(it's) because I do't confidence in my writing....

May Ling, after reflecting upon one of her small group members, concluded with these words, "I was quiet for a while, and listen to Beng Yee carefully. Then I knew that I'm not the only one who had these problem. I'm not the only who made mistake."

It seems May Ling was no longer relating to class readings and writing as just assignments but as a time where self and others are addressed and acknowleged, a

point that she casually made in her journal on the 4th week,

> "I was taking a bus, going to coffee shop to meet Sim for the conference. I was so worry and wondering what kind of questions Sim would ask.... This class is so different from what I have expected on the first day...I expected something like learning how to write a discriptive esay, how to start and conclude a esay etc...Somehow when this class goes on, I always emotionally involved in the class. I started to be more conscious how I feel about English...

The consciousness May Ling is developing as an English language user is sharply revealed in an after-class discussion we had shortly after that. During class I had shared with the students my language background and how I (had?) learned to claim the power of writing as a non-native speaker. May Ling, along with two other students stayed to talk with me further. May Ling questioned me, her voice heavy with concern and anxiety,

> Sim, I want to ask you. Is that what you want us to do? To feel about English the way you do? I mean, I can see that English means something to you -- that it's important to you. Is that what you want to do in our class, you want to change us? Make us think the way you do?

Her concerns were echoed by the other two students standing next to her. Sensing their discomfort and my gut reaction was whether I had "distorted" my sutdy by the sharing of my love of writing with them. I paused and then very carefully I told them that I wasn't trying to change them but rather (that) my aim was to provide an alternative to the way writing has often been viewed. "No, you don't have to feel about English the way I do," I reassured them. May Ling began to talk for about five minutes about how this class was "just" a requirement, and nothing else. Then right in the middle of her talk, May Ling stopped and pondered, "But you know, sometimes I wonder. I mean your questions made me think about how I really feel about English. I mean why do

I do certain things, like...." in which she gave examples where English did mean something to her.

This questioning stance was echoed in her reflections on my language experience,

> While I was listening, a lot of questions raised in my mind. .... I remember what I had said to my friend before I came to USA. I said, "If I didn't learnt and speak English with American Accent after finished my degree in USA, I should feel shame of myself. Now, I always wish that I had never said that before. I think the purpose of language is to communicate, is to express yourself, is to let people understand what you say, is not how well you say...."

May Ling, by using writing to capture her perceptions of what it meant to use English began to examine her own assumptions of language learning. English has become for May Ling more than a subject.

During one of our class talks, in response to one of the students' concerns that he had been discriminated against by his American counterparts (a view wholeheartedly shared by many in the class) I suggested that he could address his concerns by writing to The Daily Nebraskan , our university paper. The suggestion was taken up by the class except for two students, one of whom was May Ling. When asked by her peers why she refused, she said, "Well, it's not that I don't want to write the letter. I just feel that I can't put my name down on something that I don't agree with. I mean it's not simple, we can't just accuse them, I mean look at ourselves, how we behave...I just can't put my name on it. I don't feel that I am up to it." The act of writing, it seems, was no longer doing what the instructor suggested or following the wishes of her peers. May Ling, by acknowledging how the writing act might affect her, characterizes a person taking ownership of her writing.

During the public reading of our polished writing, May Ling broke down when

reading her piece on her Grandma. The emotional scene not only impressed her peers and told them what her writing meant to her, but more importantly, it signified a turning point May Ling had in her thinking about herself as a writer. On her own, she had gone to the Writing Centre and had asked for help in developing her piece. That piece had become more than an assignment for her. In the process log for the Writing Center, May Ling wrote, "... Wow, first time I say I like writing!..." This sense of discovering, this re-looking at herself and the writing act is poignantly described in the following reflection on her piece,

> My purpose of writing is not only for grade but most importantly I'm writing it for myself and my grandmother. I want to express my feeling towards her in words and write it on the paper....I used to write just for grade but not for interest, I never understood how great it feel to write something that interested me and something I feel so strong with, For example, my love twoards my grandmum. I write it, then I read it aloud, I hear it, I'm telling myself, "This is grandmum, this is how I really feel and this is what I think!" Oh! This paper means something to me.... I understand more axactly how I feel, why I feel in a certain way and what I'm thinking of. I said, "My grandmum is week!" This was how I had been fe(e)ling since I was little. But while I was writing and intended to elaborate this point, I asked myself, "What do I mean by grandmum was weak? Why do I think she was weak? Was she really weak?" I started to think more carefully and evaluate what and how I actually think/feel and why I think/feel that way. I finally have thee answer and I eventually understand.... I made conclusion while I was writing....A lot of questions raised when I'm writing, the question and fact that I was unaware of... Writing creates questions, thoughts, understandings and conclusions...

It's fascinating to watch May Ling's self protrait as a writer develop from one of pain and anguish "It's killing me," "...seemed like torture," "...drag my mind..." to one of joy and excitment "Wow! writing is fun....." Through May Ling's eyes, we have a glimpse of what can happen when students are invited to write, when the writing act is presented as more than a requirement that needs to be fullfilled. In many ways, her

range of writing related experiences echoes that of the students in our English composition classes who have discovered the power of the writing act. More significantly, her protrait challenges us to reexamine the views we have of second language learners, especially as writers.

The teaching of second language writing has often operated under the assumptions that the job of a writing teacher is to "teach" students to write, rather than inviting them to write. Seldom are we encouraged to view our students as writers or to believe that the writing act can mean as much to them as it does with our native speakers. Under the guise of helping them to "master" the language, which frequently involves the memorization of rhetorical models and grammar rules, we discourage them from discovering a voice of their own. We need to claim the power of writing in our second language classrooms. After all, as May Ling's experiences demonstrate, "Writing (does) create(s) questions, thoughts, understandings and conclusions," even for non-native speakers of English.

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